

Dropout Rates

Although the majority of adolescents complete high school, those students who drop out of school have fewer opportunities to succeed in the work force or to assume a fully functional place in society at large than those students who complete high school. High school dropouts have lower earnings, experience more unemployment, and are more likely to receive welfare or be in prison than their peers who complete high school or college (1). The event dropout rate is a measure of the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without successfully completing a high school program.

■ In October of 1998, 4.2 percent of students 15–19 years of age, who were in grades 10–12 the previous October, were not enrolled again and had not completed high school. In total these dropouts account for approximately 400 thousand of the 9.8 million adolescents 15–19 years of age enrolled in school. The cumulative effect of several hundred thousand adolescents leaving school each year translates into several million young adults who are out of school, but lacking a high school credential.

■ The event dropout rates increased with age. Adolescents 18 years of age were twice as likely to drop out as those 15–17 years old. Although the highest dropout rates were among adolescents 19 years of age, this group comprised the smallest portion (8 percent) of all students enrolled the previous October. Increasing relative age of a student within school grade has been associated with behavioral problems, absenteeism, negative self-image, and high dropout rates (2).

■ Socioeconomic status is strongly associated with the decision to stay in school. Students from low income families (lowest 20 percent of family incomes) dropped out of high school at a rate over 3 times that of adolescents from middle income families, and over 4 times the rate of adolescents from high income families (highest 20 percent of family incomes).

■ In 1998 non-Hispanic black and Hispanic students were more likely to leave school before graduating than non-Hispanic white students.

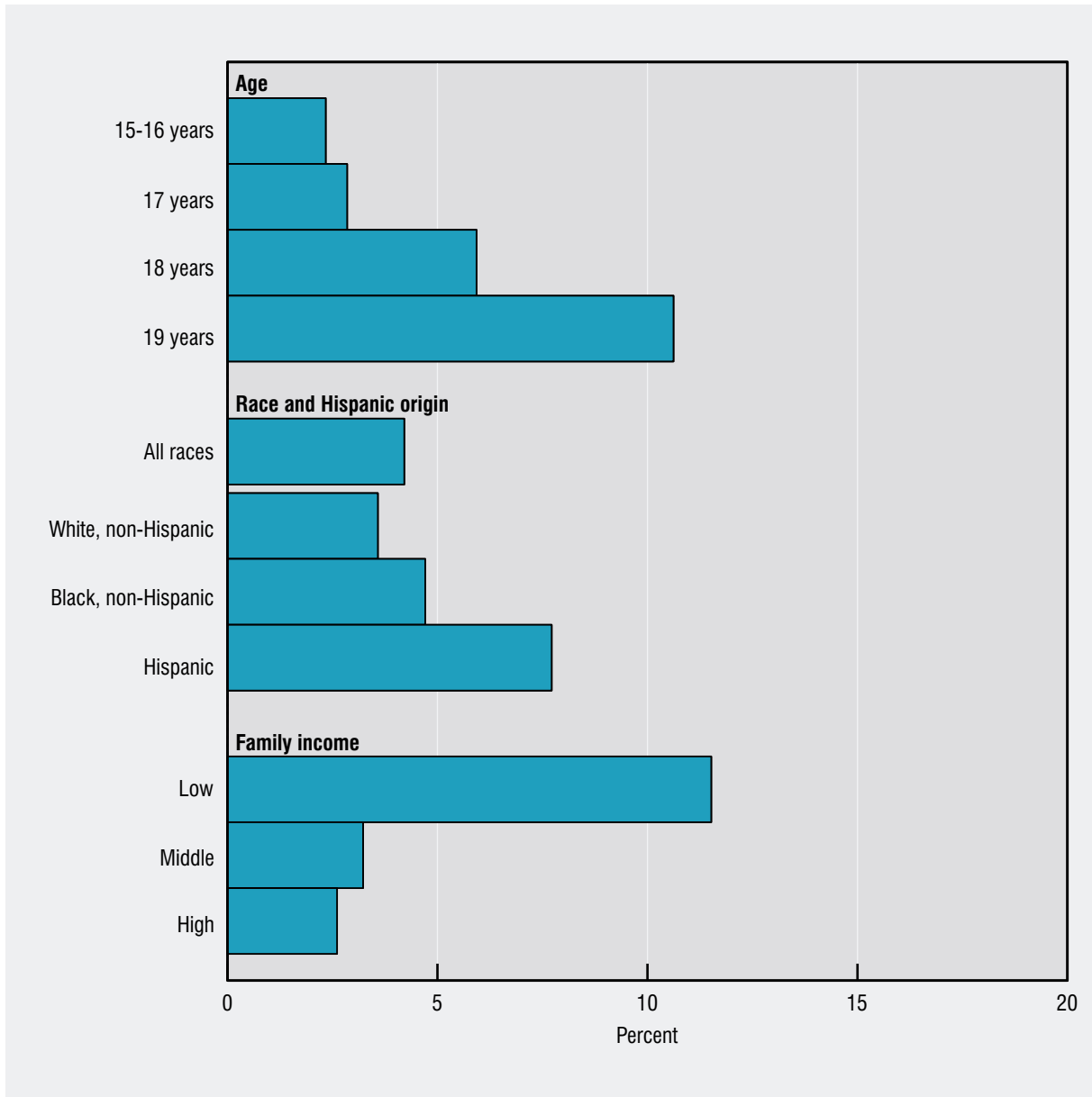
■ In 1998, 85 percent of young adults 18–24 years of age completed high school (3). Reducing the dropout rate increases the percent of young adults who complete a high school education.

■ Out of school adolescents are more likely than those in school to smoke, to use alcohol, marijuana, or cocaine, to have been involved in a physical fight, and to have been sexually active (4).

References

1. McMillen M, Kaufman P. Dropout rates in the United States: 1996. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington: NCES 98–250. 1997.
2. Hayes DN, Hemenway D. Age-within-school-class and adolescent gun-carrying. *Pediatrics* 103(5):e64. 1999.
3. U.S. Bureau of the Census. Current Population Survey. October 1998.
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Health risk behaviors among adolescents who do and do not attend school: United States, 1992. *Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 43:129–32. 1994.

Figure 4. Event dropout rates among adolescents 15–19 years of age, by age, race, Hispanic origin, and family income: United States, 1998



NOTES: The event dropout rate is the percent of those in grades 10–12, ages 15–19, who were enrolled the previous October, but who were not enrolled and had not graduated the following October. Low income is the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes; high income is the top 20 percent of all family incomes; middle income is the 60 percent in between. Age when a person dropped out may be one year younger because the dropout event can occur at any time over a 12-month period. See Data Table for data points graphed.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October 1998.